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UNDERSTANDING VERNACULAR EXPERIENCES OF FILM IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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It is often claimed that personal appreciation of films compromises their study. In particular, film students are often confronted with a conflict between negotiating their personal attitudes towards specific films, and dealing with them as objects of academic enquiry. This conflict is a widely recognised problem among those teaching film. Many of us will recognize the situation, most common in seminars, of having to 'break through the barrier' of students' personal preferences in order to 'have them' use academic tools of investigation. The conflict is sometimes seen as insoluble, with personal opinions blocking 'proper understanding' of film. From another direction, it can become a ground for denigrating film studies as a 'Mickey Mouse subject, by characterising the field as an impossible mix of inaccessible jargon and personal opinion.

This is a report on a research project which sought to make this dilemma itself into a subject of investigation by measuring how a conscious intervention impacts on the ways in which film students manage the conflict between their personal enjoyment and cultural involvements with film (dubbed for short their vernacular engagements), and academic study of film. In our opinion, properly understanding this conflict might enable us to turn it into an advantage. A controlled, measured intervention in the process might address this 'blockage', making it explicit to students, enabling them to reflect on it. They might then negotiate the conflict for themselves. These were the goals and hopes of this piece of action research.

Judged against its full original aims, the project failed, for reasons we set out briefly below. However the materials which we gathered still proved rich and interesting, and point suggestively to some way in which students might be helped to study film.

Lay Out of the Project: Goals and Problems

When planning this project, we found it hard to find much relevant literature. No known initiatives in the study of literacy (media literacy included) offered a model or methodology on which we could build. The main available models (eg, Quinn and MacMahon, 1993; Hobbs, 1998a; 1998b; Kellner, 1998) appear to assume that tools for surveying problems in learning (through) media cannot be used in the learning process itself. Instead, they concentrate on remedying a learning situation which is seen as stable, independent of socio-economic or socio-demographic variables; in which the learning tools and methods are not part of the process that allow students to learn. Some of the most recent developments in studying learning (through) media address this problem, but so far these projects are works in progress and it remains to be seen if they are working towards similar aims as our project (see: Rosenbaum & Beentjes, 2003; Hill; 2003).

Our approach in fact shares the concerns Morris Shamos voiced in his paper on 'The Myth of Scientific Literacy' (Shamos, 1995). Shamos argues that too often attempts to increase scientific literacy ignore personal experiences of and attitudes towards science. He proposes to make these part of the learning of science, encapsulating not just a science literacy, but a "scientific awareness", and thus forcing the subject of study itself to place itself firmly within (rather than alongside) society.

Our project, funded by a small grant from the Art, Design and Communication Learning and Teaching Subject Network, was designed to work as follows. We wanted to see what consequences might flow from designing into our first year curriculum a particular component of self-reflection, through which students might be encouraged to *relativise* their own involvements without them feeling that they were either derogated or put at risk. They could keep their personal and social pleasures, but they would learn that pleasures are not absolutes, but can be enquired into critically. We planned to do this by showing the students a 'difficult' film which, for most, would be outside their normal viewing range. We would then gather up their immediate and pre-reflective responses to the film using a questionnaire which would allow us to categorise the students' responses along two dimensions – Liking, and Approval – and then explore the consequences of their self-allocations in terms of understanding of the film, its narrative, situation and moral implications. The film chosen was *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) which was about to be re-released.

The project involved us then in analysing the students' responses and, at an appropriate mid-year point, holding lectures and seminars in which they could hear our analysis. They would then have an opportunity to discuss this, and to think through the implications of seeing their own responses to films as patterned, culturally-grounded, and involving differences and arguments. To close the project, we would ask the students near the end of the year to complete a second short questionnaire, designed to explore how their views on *A Clockwork Orange*, and on films and film studies in general, had developed and evolved across the year, and how they understand the relationship between vernacular engagements with and academic understandings of film.

In order that we could measure the difference that our intervention might have made, it was imperative that we have control groups. Therefore we sought three partner institutions, with equivalent large first year film courses. Because their students would not have had the intervention, it should be possible to explore *differences* emergent in the final questionnaire. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond our control, we were unable to obtain data from our partner institutions, and the comparative aspect of the research became impossible. By the time we knew this, we could only proceed with our local plans. We utilised a first questionnaire in mid-October very successfully with our own students (with over two thirds of our 300 first-year students completing), held a well-attended feedback lecture and subsequent seminar in January, and utilised a moderately successful final questionnaire (with just over a third of the students completing).

Rather than waste data and materials, we have used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to paint a portrait of some important characteristics of a substantial cohort of film students. This essay reports on the materials, analysis, and findings of this process. It is of necessity in two parts, which are only loosely related to each other. The first part reports our findings on students' vernacular responses to seeing *A Clockwork Orange* as part of our first year module *Studying Film* in the Department of Theatre, Film, and Television Studies. The main parts of these findings were presented to the students and discussed with them, thus introducing these research tools into the teaching process. The second part takes this use one step further and reports our findings on the ways our students experienced the impact of our course on their understandings of, and relationships with, film.[2]

The Appeal of *A Clockwork Orange*

A Clockwork Orange comes with a powerful reputation. The film also occupies a rare place in film history, as a film that addresses established representational and aesthetic issues, and at the same challenges them (or even, abuses them). To put it baldly, it is a film of which it is said that the very ways in which it claims to be a critique of the relationship between media and society, also sets it up as an example of what it is criticizing (Nelson, 1982; Lobrutto, 1999; Ciment, 2003). Typically, most first year students in a film course will have heard about (parts of) that reputation. It was also clear to our students that it was this reputation which motivated its place within the module. Our research methods had to try to take all this into account.

Our approach was to look for ways in which we could capture complexities among those opinions. Simply 'scoring' the film along a five-point scale of liking and disliking would not allow any distinctions between those who appreciated the effort but disliked the result, for instance. We therefore opted for an approach which distinguished responses along two dimensions, of enjoyment of the film (grouping enjoy – neutral – didn't enjoy), and admiration (admire – neutral – didn't admire). This generates a nine-cell structure of responses, set out below (p. 6). This nine-cell structure was derived from earlier research on *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1996), a film whose reputation was also, although differently, seen as problematic and controversial (Barker et al, 2001). Working in this way served two functions: first, it obviously allowed the students to voice their personal response to the film in terms of enjoyment; while allowing them also to measure the film as an achievement. But at the same time, the simple fact that students were invited to respond along two dimensions encouraged them not to treat their responses as given and indivisible. It

thus introduced the possibility that their personal response might not be identical with their estimate of the film's worth, on social or ethical grounds.

These dimensions formed part of a short questionnaire made available on the web (see Appendix 1), to which the students were pointed in the third week of teaching. It also asked them to briefly comment on their reasons for their choices for enjoyment and admiration. Additional questions asked respondents to provide information on their expectations when they watched the film, to list any other films that *A Clockwork Orange* reminded them of, and to summarise their sense of the predominant idea of the film. A final group of questions asked for some minimal socio-demographic information (age, gender, location of upbringing, any previous study of film). The lack of data from the control groups (the comparative part of our project) made these last questions effectively useless. We do not therefore analyse these data here.

211 students responded to our web-questionnaire. The spread of responses is indicated below.

Graph 2: Spread of Responses

ENJOY / ADMIRE 116	ENJOY / NEUTRAL 12	ENJOY / NOT ADMIRE 4
NEUTRAL / ADMIRE 20	NEUTRAL / NEUTRAL 29	NEUTRAL / NOT ADMIRE 4
NOT ENJOY /	NOT ENJOY /	NOT ENJOY /

ADMIRE	NEUTRAL	NOT ADMIRE
5	13	8

The majority of respondents (55%) positioned themselves as having enjoyed and admired *A Clockwork Orange*, while less than one out of five (16.2%) gave negative responses on either dimension. Only 8 respondents placed themselves on the negative pole of both axes. If our group could be taken as representative, these results would seem to confirm the status of *A Clockwork Orange* as a 'masterpiece of cinema': a film that manages to deliver pleasure to its audiences, while also earning respect for how that pleasure (or any other achievement it is perceived to have) is realised. But of course we cannot treat our response-group in this way. Instead, our strategy has been to find ways to see these responses as 'non-obvious'.

When we look at the kind of supporting comments offered for the positive response, it is interesting to see that, all in all, they fell into two kinds – neatly addressing two different achievements. A first kind emphasised the aesthetic appeal of the film, referring to it as "poetry in motion", "masterpiece", "original", "genius", or "true art". Taken a little more generally, considerations of the craftiness of the film also belong under this banner, naming Kubrick ("respect for Kubrick", "Kubrick's painstaking direction", "Kubrick was original", "Kubrick used the correct blend…"), or praising the style of the film ("atmospheric", "visually as well as structurally it stands out…", "…music score adds to the natural crescendo"), and even trying to put into generic categories ("surreal", "dark humour", or having a "cartoon-like feel to it").

A second kind of appraisal addressed the theme(s) of the film. Here too Kubrick's name played an important role ("Kubrick causes us to question", "I admire

Kubrick's guts"), but much more important are considerations of the connection between the film and society. For some, these connections were personal, when they claimed *A Clockwork Orange* was "thought-provoking" and "provocative", or caused "moral conflict". For others, it linked to specific problems in society, most notably "violence". More specifically, the film was said to be addressing "social behaviour between people", "state violence", (or "the government has the power to exploit and abuse"), and "scapegoating". Specific references in this respect were "Big Brother" and "1984". Here too, a few made efforts to put these considerations into generic categories (like "social realism", "psychological head screwer"), although most respondents refrained from doing this.

What is remarkable about these two kinds of appraisal is that hardly any attempts were made to build bridges between them. Overall, respondents elaborated either on the film's aesthetics, or its relationship with society. This dichotomy also showed itself in the kinds of language used. In most cases, elaborations on the relationship with society occurred from a first-person point of view, whereas aesthetic considerations were more often than not phrased as matters of fact, without identifying a point of view. It is here that a difference between enjoyment and admiration showed itself most clearly. Appraisals of admiration were, a few exceptions notwithstanding, invariably voiced from a first-person point of view ("I admire…"). This dichotomy is strange, in our view, given our experience that students such as these will often also make the following sorts of declarative statements: "everyone's opinion is different when it comes to art", versus "it is easy to see the message of this film". In other words, there is in our view a puzzling situation – students, when giving their personal opinions, present aesthetic responses as if they were 'facts' – yet will frequently adopt a meta-position that reduces these 'facts' to
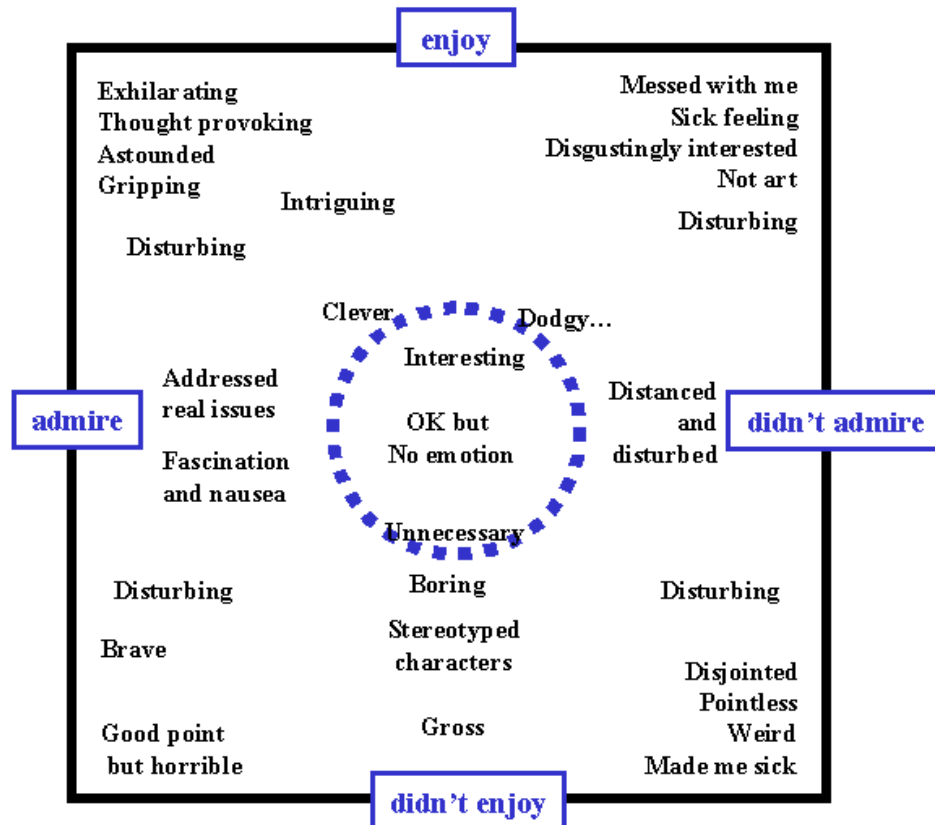
personal opinions; yet in the opposite direction, while they present their interpretations of the thematic meanings of a film as personal opinions, their philosophical position on these veers in the opposite direction, towards seeing them as 'obvious', and 'given'.

How might it be possible to throw light on this puzzle? We believe that some progress can be made by considering one other strange feature of our responses: the operation of the category of the 'disturbing'.

Seeing *A Clockwork Orange* as 'disturbing'

The fact that there are hardly any bridges between the two kinds of appraisal seems to suggest that our students found it difficult to come up with a language that allowed them to balance their personal views on what the film was about (and how it was relevant to them), with how they thought they could talk about its aesthetics and structure. An intriguing example of this difficulty is their use of the word 'disturbing'. This word occurs in almost every category of the nine-cell structure. 'Disturbing' thus somehow manages to express a lot of their viewing experiences. Yet it also becomes clear that it may mean very different things. When grouped with other terms used in the same categories, some sharp differences come into view:

Semantic patterning

	enjoy	
Exhilarating Thought provoking Astounded Gripping Disturbing	Intriguing	Messed with me Sick feeling Disgustingly interested Not art Disturbing

Clever ▪▪▪▪ Dodgy…
Interesting

admire — Addressed real issues — Fascination and nausea — OK but No emotion — Distanced and disturbed — didn't admire

Unnecessary

admire		didn't admire
Disturbing Brave Good point but horrible	Boring Stereotyped characters Gross	Disturbing Disjointed Pointless Weird Made me sick
	didn't enjoy	

A great deal could be said about this diagram. Among other things, it suggests that the most positive responses combine some strongly viscerally excited reactions with equally powerful cognitive responses. The various kinds of ambivalent response are often doubled, and are intensely self-aware. The most negative responses hint at interesting combinations of kinds of judgement. But for our purposes here, it is the recurrence of "disturbing" and indeed "disturbed" that needs discussion. When used in negative self-allocations, 'disturbing' is linked to emotions that indicate discomfort or unwillingness to go along with the kind of viewing strategy the film seems to ask of the viewer ("disjointed" and "made me sick") – it is a statement about the viewer. However, at other points, 'disturbing' seems to refer to a textual property, a part of the film that is causing discomfort and unease (similar to "gripping" or "brave"). Whenever it is used in this way, it seems to refer to a positive feature, something that

causes enjoyment or admiration. So, on the one hand, 'disturbing' means a bad thing for the viewer, on the other hand a good thing, usually for text as well as viewer.

The term 'disturbing', then, becomes a blanket term, standing at the crossroads between textual and contextual interpretation, seemingly able to cover both personal experiences relating to the viewing strategy, as well as functioning as a label for specific textual properties. For the specific text of *A Clockwork Orange*, this makes 'disturbing' a useless concept when treated in isolation, unable to distinguish between kinds of responses, or to designate a discriminative feature. One way of making it relevant is to look at its place in discourses of the historical reception of *A Clockwork Orange*. Janet Staiger's essay (2000: 93-111) on the early controversies around *A Clockwork Orange* provides such a look. Staiger identified a set of competing discourses which greeted the film upon its release: crucially, continuing and changing discourses around 'pornography', and around 'art'; and an emergent discourse around the presentation of women on screen. What they had in common was a shared sense that the film *disturbed* existing categories. But even if the word 'disturbing' had its origin there, it does not explain its blanket usage with our students.

How, then, might we make sense of the common recourse to this term, from all positions? Precisely, we would argue, by seeing it as the *common ground upon which consideration of challenging cultural materials can begin*. Its very common-ness is the clue to its function. Its function comes most clearly into view when perceived through the grain of those who are able to relativise their own responses.

Watching *A Clockwork Orange* as a Film "Of Its Time"

A number of the responses to our questionnaire made the 'disturbing' nature of the film a topic of explicit self-commentary. They did this by constructing an argument on the *topicality* of the film; placing the film in a historical framework. In doing so, they created for themselves an opportunity to balance different viewing positions (personal or detached), different opinions (liking/disliking in different ways, admiring/not admiring in different ways), and different concerns (relationship to society, aesthetics).

The use of time-related, or historical, terminology in the comments on self-allocations, first struck us when we examined the neutral/neutral category of the nine-cell structure. Totalling 29 responses (13.7%, still the second largest category), this category evidenced two kinds of argumentations. The most obvious was a declaration of indifference towards the film, exemplified by "I didn't get the point of the film", or "interesting" (this is the entire comment), or the blanket application of "disturbing" or "disturbed" (used 3 times). On the whole, however, such declarations of indifference were rare, suggesting that *A Clockwork Orange* is a film towards which indifference is not an easy position. On the other hand there were many more comments indicating a balanced position towards the film. Many of these were very short, demonstrating a balance as a result of oppositions neutralizing each other ("disgusting yet intriguing", "wasn't as violent or disturbing as I thought it was going to be", "some parts I didn't understand; it wasn't as gory as I expected"). The ways in which these comments used juxtapositions (or comparisons with implicit standards and expectations) to explain features of the text or specific positions toward it, apparently work against an interpretation as an integrated whole. But at the same time, these comments made much effort to present themselves not as cut-up opinions but as balanced views. They shifted between remarks on the text and its status, and statements of personal

positions towards it. In other words, they went to great length to explain the mechanisms that cause the juxtaposition. Consider the following comments:

> While I understand some of the messages it was trying to convey I think at times it was just out to shock the audience.

> The plot is really good but there are several scenes which i feel were not necessary in the film.

When we look more carefully at the linguistic mechanisms used to manage these contrasts, we find that, apart from such common terms as "but", "while", or "yet", indications of time (putting the film into a historical framework) play a crucial role in the construction of arguments. The following comments are typical:

> As I had seen this film many years ago when it was still banned I still have the same views as I did then. At first I disliked the film but gradually as the film went on I kinda got interested in it began to understand it better. Movie was showing other different forms of violence such as the abuse from law and government.

I experienced many ambivalent emotions whilst watching from amusement to horror. I found the violence fairly disturbing though it was sometimes so bizarre it was amusing such as when the cat lady is fighting with Alex around the sculpture. The relationship between Alex's mother and her 'little son' was also amusing.

The indications of time are essential in the construction of the argument in these comments. Not only do they offer a means of juxtaposing different opinions, they also provide the writers with a rationale and a standard against which every single individual item of the film, and of their positions towards it, can be placed. 'Time' then becomes a structuring tool in constructing a comment explaining an attitude towards a film.

In general, time-related arguments in our students' responses structure arguments in three different ways. First, they explain and describe personal attitudes towards the film, often also to provide reasons for a change in that attitude. Second, they describe and explain the status of the film, as one that has either lost or gained meaning over the decades. Third, time-related arguments are also used to comment, through the film's topic, on the way society has changed or remained the same. At their simplest, such time-related arguments are only indicated by specific words ("then", "now", "still"), or the tense of verbs used ("it is" versus "it was", or "I am" versus "I was"). At a more sophisticated level, from practically every cell of responses there are time-related comments which relativise the status of their opinion, the film text, and the societal context, while constructing an argument on the functions and meanings of the film. Two examples to illustrate:

> The film gave me a memory of my school days. I was only 13 at the time of the films release - obviously I could not go and see it. But some of the older-looking lads did. Soon after this they came to school dressed like Alex and his gang and looked frightening. Ironically they all received a beating with the

cane and were sent home as state violence was still in use then. Which I feel is what the film is actually showing. Oh those were the days!

> Uncomfortable. When I first viewed the film because of my generation I thought it was amusing to say the least, now watching it today I watched it as if I were in the premiere audience of 1971 and felt uncomfortable with the images I was seeing. Nonetheless I still found it enjoyable and a good movie.

These two quotes indicate different steps in coming to such sophistication, the first being mainly personal, the second combining elements of personal memory and textual properties. They demonstrate how time-related arguments can bind personal opinion (and memory) together with factual history and discussions of the connection between the film text and its context. The following quote goes even further in evoking film history (and its reputation) to construct a careful rhetoric on the meaning of *A Clockwork Orange*.

> Problematic. Caught in a moral conflict. Having been brought up with the Hollywood ideals of heroes and villains right and wrongs the film positioned you in such a place that made me uncomfortable. It never made you think or feel a specific thing relying on the individual response. I like the idea that an ideology wasn't forced upon me I was given credit to come up with my own conclusion. Forced to shift my opinion and position several times. Hating the character hating society blaming the individual blaming society.

Like previous examples, this quote switches between personal opinion ("I like the idea…") and textual properties, but the placing of these in a historical framework ("having been brought up…") also allows for a mental space in which a process of rhetorical communication between text and viewer seems to occur ("It never made you think", "the film positioned you"). In using time-related terminology and creating this mental space for communication, this student develops an argument of a sophistication close to what David Bordwell described as 'academic criticism' (Bordwell, 1989).

Changing Styles of Viewing and Becoming Critical

In mid-year, the issues we have outlined above were presented to the students in a lecture. This lecture encouraged the students to go beyond thinking about 'right' or 'wrong' responses to the film, and address instead the variety of ways people responded. Subsequent seminars discussed the whole question of different audience responses to films.

Then, at the end of the year, our students were asked to complete a second questionnaire, eliciting their sense of what they had learnt from their participation in our course, as well as asking them to say if their views of *A Clockwork Orange* had changed in the course of the year[3]. We decided to see what might be learnt by what might be called 'portrait-painting': that is, drawing up a descriptive summary of our students' responses that might reveal patterns within the differences. We began with their open-ended, discursive responses to whether they felt they had been influenced by the module.

The group of students who claimed not to be influenced at all turned out, upon analysis, to be the most puzzling group. There are a number of strands to these responses but arguably they intersect at a certain point. The first strand is a simple reassertion of their own likes and tastes ("I love musical films"; "Always enjoyed and watched cheap and nasty horror films"), and a measurement of the course against how far it met those ("we only watched *Singin' in the Rain*"; "The course this year hasn't changed that at all."). The premise underlying these responses is that the course is to be measured by how far it *meets pleasures*. Alongside this was a sense of the *failure* of the course to provide any reason to do any more than this:

> It has not taught me to see anything more in films and has therefore not influenced my way of seeing them.

> You watch a film to enjoy it not to study it, so I would find myself analysing it and not enjoying it as much as I should.

> Unfortunately I can't say I will be watching any less 1940-50s musicals or romantic comedies due to this course. However I do prefer writing and studying about different films that I don't watch for pleasure.

The imperative form of these answers ('not as much as I *should*') finds the course failing by virtue of its interference with the *perceived legitimate* purposes of films. The concept of a 'viewing style' is crucial here. It is a demarcation of film as an object of *taste*, where the student's judgement of his/her already-established capacity is treated as an unarguable given.

When we extend this category to include little changes (as in the last quote above), new elements begin to emerge: 'Pleasure' is still protected (if relativised a touch by that word 'unfortunately') but a *different possible use* of films, for study, is acknowledged – with its own forms of enjoyment. This agreeing to extend one's range of films introduces another element – that a person's 'canon' may be expanded by beginning to have *other ways of viewing* ("it has made me more selective"). Often, this small broadening of the personal canon also introduces an element of *analysis* ("I look at films in a more analytical way"; "it has opened my mind"), allowing them to "set films in more context". Given the many qualifiers ("…which is not always a good thing"), analysis is not a developed or indeed welcome process, but it does expand the available repertoire.

When we move to students claiming to have been influenced somewhat, we find that the key change introduced at this level is the introduction of the term 'critical'("I see things in a more critical light."; "I tend to view films more critically now."). But the term 'critical' contains more than one element. Here for instance, it combines the employment of *theories* with their incorporation into *how we view*:

> David Bordwell's levels of understanding and Laura Mulvey's idea of the
>
> male viewpoint stick in my mind. (…) I now find myself critically analysing
>
> what I view using such ideas.

The element that is very new in here is the *examination of self*, and we found this in several similar answers ("I am less a spectator and more a critic now."). This self-awareness often appears to be combined with a distrust of the ways in which respondents have learned about films up to now ("critical praise is not worth all that

much as time may lead to different evaluations"). 'Critical', then, covers admitting a broader range of films; putting a question-mark over 'given opinion' about films – including one's own; altering the *style* of viewing to become more distanced and analytical – but thereby enjoyable in a new way; and offering a vocabulary of terms and concepts for this re-examination.

What seems added at the level of greatest change is, first, a sense of simple *excitement* at the encounter (with expressions such as "completely different", "a new horizon to film viewing", "complete surprise"). This does not automatically mean a sense of permanent change, rather more like a role being tried on – which may be discarded, as here:

> The course has caused me to look at films in a completely different way. However I am glad I will not be furthering my studies next year as I think the course will hinder my enjoyment of films.

For others there is a sense of a new kind of enjoyment being taken on board, with an interesting complexity around pleasure creeping into some answers ("I am now more inclined to watch these sorts of films as I can now create a constructive argument for my opinions"). Now the pleasure lies as much in the *aftermath* of the film as in the film itself, which may indeed itself still be disliked at some levels. At its strongest this new *social* element around films can affect wider social relationships:

> I don't see films in the same way now. I drive my family crazy because I start studying every film we see. I liked them before, now I love them because I see more in them.

From this broad sketch it is possible to see some of the differences associated with what we might call degrees of affiliation with the course and its objectives. There is nothing terribly surprising so far in what this tells us. However, when we turned to some simple quantitative assessments of the responses, some tantalising peculiarities emerged which invited a deeper exploration.

Being Influenced and the 'Course Position'

Although the response-base is not large (just over 100), we examined them with simple quantitative techniques. Students had been asked to recall their responses to *A Clockwork Orange* when first shown it, and to say also how they would rate their responses to it now[4]. What is intriguing is the differences that emerge in the relations between recalled first responses to *A Clockwork Orange*, and the amount of recorded impact of the module. Figures are produced by taking an average of each group's responses (*Liking* and *Admiration* = 3 each, *Neutrality/Ambivalence* = 2, *Disliking* and *Not Admiring* = 1). These are then scaled up to 100 for ease of representation:

Table 1: Relationship between students' recall of their judgements of *A Clockwork Orange* at beginning and end of the year, and their Influence Categories:

	First viewing		End of year		Amount of	
	Degree of		*Degree of*		change	
	Liking	*Admiration*	*Liking*	*Admiration*	*Liking*	*Admiration*
Change very	74.2	92.5	83.3	96.2	9.1	3.7

Much (n = 16)

Changed somewhat (n = 37)	80.1	80.1	82.8	86.4	2.7	6.3
Changed a little (n = 11)	66.8	84.8	72.7	83.3	5.9	− 0.5
Not changed at all (n = 16)	88.8	95.5	88.8	95.5	0	0

The final column displays how far students' sense of having been changed by the course as a whole associated with changes in attitudes to *A Clockwork Orange*. Generally, liking and admiration increased a little, and it did so more, the more people felt changed by the course as a whole. But the figures could conceal changes, by flattening together those who became more positive with those who became more negative. It was therefore necessary to separate these:

Table 2: Proportions of students by Influence Category changing their assessments of *A Clockwork Orange*:

	Very Much	Somewhat	A Little	Not At All
No Change	11	26	18	13
More positive	6	7	4	2
Less positive	1	3	0	0
TOTAL	18	36*	22	15*
% of changers	63.6%	38.5%	22.2%	15.4%

* In each asterisked case one student gave no responses to these questions.

These figures confirm the wider assertions about the degree of overall change brought about by the course. However, they lead to one surprising result. If we consider the proportions who, at start- and end-of-year, report themselves Likers and Admirers of *A Clockwork Orange*, a surprising aberration shows:

Table 3: Percentages of students by Influence Category who Liked and Admired *A Clockwork Orange* throughout the year:

Influenced:	Very Much	Somewhat	A Little	Not At All
Liked/admired				
through the year	50%	47.2%	40.9%	80%

This is a striking reversal of decline in the final category. For some reason, a very high proportion of those who declared themselves not altered at all by the experience of our course at the same time liked and admired *A Clockwork Orange*. It may be that these students see themselves as already occupying a 'course position' ("the course is 'defending this film from criticism and censorship', I've always thought it was fine, so no change"). That might account for their response that the course had had no influence on them – they were 'there already'[5]. An alternative explanation might be that the film was being assessed by criteria seen as having little to do with those advanced by the course (for example, "it's just entertainment, a 'bit of fun', what's all the fuss about?"). To explore this possibility and others, we had to return to a qualitative examination of our students' responses.

Being Able to Generalise

Note first that the average length of answers again shows a regular pattern across the four categories:

Table 4: Relationship between Lengths of Answers (by No. of Words) to Q4 and Influence Category:

How Much Influenced	Average words
Very Much	44.5
Somewhat	29.4
A Little	24.1
Not At All	15.3

This in itself suggests an association between *having something to say* and *feeling motivated* to say it. With this in mind, then, the following typical comments make interesting reading:

From a year of studying film it's made me more aware that even though all films are different some have the same conventions to them. *A Clockwork Orange* at first made me a bit nervous as it was in the first time I had seen it and as I was told that there was much hype that surrounded it when it first was released made me interested in seeing it. Overall I did admire the film for the statement it made and thought the film to be different from what I expected. I have seen it since the screening, the second time was not so shocking, in a way

I think all violent films with age get better, for example if the film was released today would there be all that hype? Would it be banned? I don't think so. [**Influenced Very Much** – change from *Neutral/Ambivalent + Admired*, to *Enjoyed + Admired*]

Before embarking on this course my views on *A Clockwork Orange* were far from positive as a film viewer I concentrated on its entertainment value, I did not find rape or absurd curing methods entertaining. However studying the course taught me that this film was a carrier of a message to the real work presenting itself with the truth. This film taught society to look in the mirror instead of shying away from the harsh reality that society bred. [**Influenced Somewhat** – change from *Didn't Enjoy + Didn't Admire*, to *Enjoyed + Admired*]

I hated *A Clockwork Orange*. I know this is a little negative and that it probably gave a wide scope to the course. If anything it has steered me away from wanting to watch any others of Kubrick's films. It has not influenced my view to any of the other films on the course as I judged them individually. [**Influenced A Little** – change from *Didn't Enjoy + Didn't Admire*, to *Neutral/Ambivalent + Neutral/Ambivalent*]

Now that we have studied this film I can appreciate it more so that my enjoyment (or lack of it) doesn't affect my admiration as much as it used to. [**Influenced Not At All** – change from *Didn't Enjoy + Neutral/Ambivalent*, to *Didn't Enjoy + Admire*]

Across the four responses we can see a sense of *generalisation* diminish steadily. The 'Very Much Influenced' respondent feels able to talk about *film in general* and about the role of 'hype' in pre-forming opinions around films. The 'Influenced A Little' respondent specifically refuses to operate with the general category 'film'. The 'Not At All' may be willing to recognise that there is something that can be done with a film beyond enjoying it – but s/he is not interested in doing it. A look at the others in the 'Influenced Not At All' category who always Liked and Admired *A Clockwork Orange* confirms the possibility of a 'course position'[6]. These students deny being influenced even if the course agreed with their opinion (for example, "Always enjoyed and admired *ACO* no matter"). But they do this either by re-categorising the film as "humorous" (not serious enough to be worthy of study), or by folding back into the 'commonsense' category 'violent', while complimenting him/herself on "having no problem with 'such' films". In effect they are insisting that their acceptance of a course position is *purely coincidental*.

Levels of Motivation

Some aspects of the answers to two other questions allow us to fill out more of the portrait of our students' responses. They were asked to put into words to explain why film is worth studying, and what distinctive ways of watching films this study offered (questions 6 and 7 of the second questionnaire, see appendix). Note first that here again students' responses display some of the same discrepancy which we saw in the Enjoy/Admire responses of the Not Influenced students:

Table 5: Relationship between Lengths of Answers (by No. of Words) to Qs 6-7 and Influence Category:

How Much Influenced	Average words
Very Much	57.7
Somewhat	39.8
A Little	26.9
Not At All	38.5

The rise in that last figure does suggest a higher level of motivation on the part of the 'Not At Alls' to record their thoughts on the module as a whole.

Students in the 'Influenced Very Much' group emphasise several aspects: film as a part of and as an expression of real life/culture as a whole, and important for that reason; the impact of studying film on opening one's mind to new opinions and possibilities; the correlative increases in understanding, insight and pleasure; film as a form of social/cultural power. Along with these can go a sense of becoming a member of a group who know how to do this kind of study. The following are illustrative of these, and sometimes of their interweaving:

> Studying film helps you to understand the culture and the world we live in, in the 20th and 21st century, it goes hand in hand with politics, history and other subjects. It tries to help people be more open-minded about films and trends.

Because film is relevant to society. Now we learn what we know from TV and movies. Films have impressions on us and sometimes they can become part of us. Something with that kind of power must be studied!

If you watch a film with a bunch of film students and discuss it, the discussion will be very different to with non-film students; it will be a lot more mentally stimulating and deeper with film students.

Students in the 'Influenced Somewhat' group overlap considerably with the 'Very Much' group, but there are some subtle shifts.[7] There is a greater tendency to focus on the wider knowledge of films as films, as against seeing them in terms of their place within wider social and cultural processes.

I am more aware when watching films. Knowing more improves my enjoyment.

Because it is the most widely read art form and can be used in a variety of ways having a variety of effects. A medium with so much power deserves critical analysis so that it can be maintained, controlled and developed as a technology, information media, or art form.

Those who watch films for entertainment purposes I pity; they only see the face value of what they are watching, and don't appreciate the artistic genius behind it. Studying film allows you to go beyond the restraints of

entertainment and see the wider picture. Films can tell you a lot more than who Bond's next girl will be or what his new gadgets will feature.

Again while not absolutely distinct from the previous groups, the 'Influenced a Little' group of students the responses become much more a matter of 'Why not?', a question of a perfectly reasonable personal choice made. This goes along with a sense that the primary purpose of the course is to enhance enjoyment and, with that, to expand the range of films which will be tried out. Curiously, only this group made many comments on the actual *teaching* of the course (commenting on lecturers they liked, for instance):

It provides a basis for not only analysing other films but also other forms of media. It is an enjoyable course and you learn that there is a lot more to film than just entertainment.

I think we analyse everything maybe a little too much.

If you hold an interest in film, by studying it as a subject you can strengthen that interest. By looking closely at film you are able to increase your knowledge not just on film but on its impact and consequently you can learn a lot about society and appreciate film at a higher level than entertainment.

The interesting thing about the responses from 'Not At All' group, the group resisting the curriculum, is that in many ways they are *not* different in the ways in which we

might have expected. So for instance, the following responses might well have been found in the other categories:

> Film is the most dominant cultural force in our lives – anything that dominant must be studied.

> It gives us a detailed insight into the reality of film and as so many of us watch films it seems wise to study them.

> Students may look at a film in terms of representation and read deeper meanings.

But in subtle ways differences show between some of the responses in this category and those in other categories. In particular, 'Not At Alls' tend to play with the notion of a relationship between studying and making films; and they set up an opposition between their own and the course's involvements:

> I think film students can look for more in a film. However I also think film students should take a day off every now and then and just sit back and passively watch *Navy Seals*.

> It is really interesting to find out how films are put together and stuff like that, but I can no longer simply watch a film. I pick them apart even when I really really try not to.

What is strange here is that there are admissions in here of the course having had an influence – but of it being an influence that is being simultaneously rejected. How otherwise do we easily make sense of someone responding that the course has not influenced them at all, and then saying: "I definitely watch films in a different way now. I am able to look more closely at what the film is trying to say and how the filmmakers are trying to say it"? Or again: "Once you know what to look for you can't help it. A real viewer would not sit and analyse the cultural representations or note that the film stock can affect the way the film appears"? Our sense is that although these students acknowledge that they are *able* to do this, they will *try very hard not to*. And it may be that it is precisely the balancing of these two pressures that results in their taking more words to declare their positions on these final two questions.

Conclusions

In this report, we have tried to give an account of the ways in which one cohort of students, in very divided ways, responded to *A Clockwork Orange*. Our intervention on those divisions was designed to challenge and explore simultaneously how film studies can effectively work with students' pre-existing filmic involvements and preferences.

Research by Janet Staiger has demonstrated that responses to films are linked to already existing discourses (Staiger, 2000). We believe it is possible to apply such insights to the ways in which students acquire the skills and understandings required to study film. Our first questionnaire shows how attitudes towards *A Clockwork Orange*, although overwhelmingly positive in tenor, varied widely in attitude,

position, and argumentation. It also showed how students struggle with the academic language of film study. This becomes particularly visible in their use of the term "disturbing". The very frequency of the term made it a test-case, exposing a series of tensions involved in the management of that language. It was not some simple case of accepting what they may have perceived as a 'course position'. It was the acceptance of the needs, even the pleasures, of a kind of reflexive self-examination which distinguished those who felt altered by our *Studying Film* module. Many students tried to go beyond this acceptance, and attempted to connect their personal attitudes towards *A Clockwork Orange* with its textual features and contextual elements (especially its history), in ways close to Bordwell's 'academic criticism' (Bordwell, 1989). This alone demonstrates learning from their part.

Our research attempted to see how these very constructions can become part of a learning process. By making their own initial responses explicit to the students, we hoped to show how comments could harbour explicit and implicit assumptions about film aesthetics (what films are or should be), film contexts (how films operate in the world and reflect society), and viewers' relationships to films. By showing this, we tried to demonstrate that the 'liking' and 'disliking' of films is a part of film studies. Did we succeed? The evidence suggests a rather complex achievement. Some students rejected our attempts – precisely on grounds of making a 'nature reserve' of their personal responses. But those who accepted our approach, did succeed in quite complex ways in reconsidering the grounds and the directions of their pleasures, without feeling the need as a result of that to change them. That is an achievement we are pleased with.

But at a price. These students are the ones who are most aware of the public mocking of media studies generally as a 'Mickey Mouse' course. It is *only* in the answers of either 'Very Much' or 'Somewhats' that mention of this occurs, as in:

From speaking to people who do not study film they do not understand what studying film is all about. They think it's a mickey mouse course! Well of course it's not science! But there is an academic study side to it as well. If someone is not interested in films or they are not creative they probably wouldn't understand what I was going on about. [*Very much influenced*]

Because you are surrounded by people who care about film and don't dismiss it as a non-subject. And with good reason – there's so much more to film than you can imagine, it's fascinating. [*Very Much Influenced*]

For students such as these, the debates about the status of media studies play a role in how they see and study film. It leads not just to the defence of the field, but, importantly, also to the explanation of why film study matters – a requirement to make explicit its assumptions, positions within academia, and its politics[8].

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Appendix 1 –

First Questionnaire: Responses to *A Clockwork Orange*

1a Which of the following comes closest to your response to *A Clockwork Orange*?

Enjoyed   Neutral/ambivalent   Didn't enjoy

Now can you say what word, phrase or expression comes closest to expressing your feelings about this? (max 100 words)

1b Which of the following comes closest to your response to A Clockwork Orange?

Admire   Neutral/ambivalent   Didn't admire

Now can you say what word, phrase or expression comes closest to expressing your feelings about this? (max 100 words)

2   Before you saw *A Clockwork Orange* for the first time, can you recall any expectations you had about the kind of film it would be? (max 100 words)

3   What else does it remind you of? Can you name some other films (up to three) that seem to you most like *A Clockwork Orange*? [This question does not need to be answered if none come to mind.]

1.

2.

3.

4   If you had to sum up in no more than a sentence what to you was the predominant idea of the film,

how would you express it? (max 100 words)

Finally, a few things about yourself:

What is your age? [17 – 21   22 – 25 26 – 30 over 30]

Sex: male / female

Which most nearly describes where you mainly grew up?

City   Suburb   Small town   Countryside

Before you came to University, had you followed any course which included the study of

film? Yes / No

Appendix 2 –

Second questionnaire: Studying film at University

1. What, to you, have been the most memorable films you've studied during this year?

      1

      2

      3

Can you say why?

2. Would you say that the film course you've taken this year has influenced your personal viewing preferences in any way?

      Very much   Somewhat   A little   Not at all

Can you say why or how?

3. If you were asked to put into words how you see the relations between being a film viewer, and being a film student, how would you express it?

4. Near the beginning of the year, we asked you how you personally felt about *A Clockwork Orange*? What were your views then? Remember – we asked you if you *enjoyed* and if you *admired* it:

      Enjoyed   Neutral or ambivalent   Didn't enjoy

      Admired   Neutral or ambivalent   Didn't admire

Have your views on *A Clockwork Orange* been changed in any way by your film course?

      Enjoyed   Neutral or ambivalent   Didn't enjoy

      Admired   Neutral or ambivalent   Didn't admire

Can you explain your answers to this?

5. What to you are the three most important things you've learnt in the course of studying film this year? (They can be any kinds of thing.)

      1

2

3

6. Please put into words, as best you can, how you might explain to someone else now why film is worth studying at University.

7. Now that you've been introduced to the academic study of film, how distinct (and in what ways) do you see this from the way 'real' people watch movies?

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[2] We should note that a separate but related research report has been written, following on from this project. In the week in which we had planned to show *A Clockwork Orange* to our students for a second time – this time consequent on a first lecture, and guided by a set of questions which would draw attention to the film's formal organisation and construction of meanings, we discovered that Channel 4 would be screening it. Because of the risk of overloading, we offered the students a choice – either to have the second screening of *A Clockwork Orange* or to watch instead the also just re-released *Straw Dogs*, which came from exactly the same period and had been as much dogged by controversy. By an overwhelming vote, they chose to watch *Straw Dogs*. Their reactions to watching this were sufficiently striking as to suggest the possibility of a small, separate research project on this. A questionnaire to the students elicited 60 responses, and these have been subjected to close analysis in their own right. This essay has yet to be published, but is available on request from Martin Barker. It may particularly be of interest since, by pure chance, its production coincided with the publication of a piece of research on a largely overlapping topic, but using quite different methodologies, funded by the British Board of Film Classification.

[3] This had to be done by cohort, since students had been guaranteed anonymity, therefore we could not compare their responses individually on a before-and-after basis. The idea had originally been, of course, to compare the degrees and kinds of change between our own and the three other cohorts of students, in order to locate any changes that might have been the result of our particular intervention.

[4] We did not of course have a way of checking the accuracy of their recall of their earlier responses to the film, as the questionnaires had been anonymous, but for purposes of this analysis this does not matter.

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⁵ We looked at answers to a question about memorable films (with censorship issues) and compared these within each influence category, but we could not find other differences or discrepancies that confirmed this.

⁶ It should be noted here that the lectures on *A Clockwork Orange* were actually *intended* to introduce a note of questioning over the film – not in the 'traditional' sense of worrying that people might have 'gone out and copied it', but by pointing to evidence that Kubrick himself was significantly attracted to and influenced by the work of Robert Ardrey, the pop ethologist who sought to theorise 'violence' and to explain it as an expression of natural tendencies distorted by unnatural modern living conditions (on Ardrey's views, see Barker, 1981). This second-order critique of the film passed most students by – the one exception that we knew of being a student who was an ardent fan of Kubrick and who ran one of the major websites devoted to his work. He confronted the lecturer after the first lecture with the 'unfairness' of the critique!

⁷ We should note one perverse respondent in this category, whose response to the last question tells enough: "Film is film is film. Studying film is worthless because it is only about entertainment and the people who write about it are too stupid to write about anything else. Who can't write about a fuckin film!? It's like writing a goddam letter! Oh yeah this meant that and that meant this. Who fuckin cares because it is all entertainment and money is the bottom line. Film study is worthless." The only thing worth asking here is why this student recorded him/herself as having been Somewhat Influenced by the course.

⁸ Because of the collapse of the comparative aspect of the research, we cannot be sure how, if at all, our course is in any way different from others. It may seem trite, but it remains true that this is an invitation to another round of research in which the differential impacts of different teaching strategies might be tested.